



carpetbaggers and the government.” The story goes that Jake’s great-great-grandfather, John Jacob, and John Jacob’s son, John Jacob Jr., stole cotton bales off trains headed for Yankee territory. “The proceeds from the bales were used to pay taxes on the land,” Jake says.

In 1996, after reacquiring some of the original homestead, Water Valley Lodge opened for its first hunting season—a dream years in the making. “I wanted to make a better living and stay outside for work,” Jake says. “It was a natural fit with our lifestyle.”

Jake’s wife, Pia, agrees. “This is who we are; this is where we are,” she says. “There are definitely benefits to living this life. One must find a way to make the most of the assets and blessings we’ve been afforded.”

It’s one thing to decide to run a hunting operation and quite another to actually do it; the sheer magnitude of the business was often overwhelming at first. “The learning curve was really rough,” Jake admits.

The busiest time is October through May 1. But there are chores year-round, and everyone in the Utsey family pitches in. Jake supervises hunts, maintains equipment and property; he also hauls hay and helps manage the family’s timber operation. Pia runs the office and the hospitality side of the business, which includes meal preparation and housekeeping.

John Jacob tends the grass, hauls hay, helps move equipment and acts as a guide looking for wounded animals. And, laughs Pia, “you can’t get him in at night from the skinning shed. He’s as good as any of

our guides.” Nine-year-old Gaddy helps out in the dining hall.

And it’s everyone’s job to make visiting hunters feel at home, which is a crucial part of the business. “Hospitality is something you have to do yourself,” says Pia, who gleaned valuable hospitality expertise in hotels and country clubs. “We don’t run hunters through our business like cattle; we limit numbers each season. In order to make people feel at home, it has to be your home. That’s not something you can easily hire someone else to do.”

Operational How-Tos

Water Valley Lodge offers four types of hunts: quail, turkey, deer and hog. “During the year we’ll hire up to 10 part-time employees as guides for the various seasons,” says Jake.

To keep the game around, food plots have to be planted and maintained. The smaller plots—anywhere from 1 to 2 acres—generally run north and south to “give plots more sunlight in winter months,” Jake says. Longer plots—up to 10 acres—are easier to plant and are set up, when possible, to allow hunters to be upwind of game.

According to Jake, to run an operation of this caliber, permits and insurance are required. There are burn and chemical permits, and insurance must be kept on everything the lodge hunts, all vehicles, implements, heavy equipment, buildings and sheds.

Hunting may be the main source of income, but corporate clientele has suffered greatly since the

1 Hospitality is one of the keys to the success of Water Valley Lodge. Meals are served in the dining hall, along with conversation.

2 The Utseys’ business is truly a family affair (Pictured: Jake, Pia, Gaddy and John Jacob).

3 Ten-year-old John Jacob does chores year-round, and scouts for wounded animals during hunting season.

4 The Utseys log long hours in food plots on their Massey Ferguson tractors.